

## THE GODS FROM NEMRIK

Stefan Karol KOZŁOWSKI\*

The collection of more than 20 zoo- and anthropomorphic stone sculptures from Nemrik (Iraq) is already enjoying international fame. Perhaps the most eminent specimen—a bird head rendition in limestone—published along with a few others by S. K. Kozłowski and A. Kempisty (1990), has since been reproduced by J. Cauvin, M. Roaf, A. Invernizzi and J. Huot, among others.

All the above authors as well as others not quoted here believe that the figurines from Nemrik are evidence of unspecified religious beliefs held in northern Mesopotamia in the 8th and 7th millennia bc, *i.e.*, in the aceramic “Neolithic” period. This interpretation is at once obvious and banal: it is hard to imagine a different “application” of such highly developed art in those days.

In fact, the banality of this explanation is so embarrassing that it is worth making an effort to arrive at a more elaborate hypothesis concerning the significance of the figurines.

1. A total of 26 figurines (cf. Table 1 and Figs 1–5) and fragments thereof were discovered in Nemrik. The collection consists of:

- (a) five whole specimens,
- (b) 21 fragmentary specimens, including:
  - specimens with preserved head (top parts);
  - figurine shafts (bottom parts) with surviving tip;
  - figurine shafts (middle parts) without tip;
  - nine figurine halfproducts in various stages of completion.

The presence of figurine halfproducts, which were as a rule destroyed specimens, and also the remodeling of used-up figurines, means of course that sculpting was done locally (traces of a workshop were discovered near house 4), most probably in specialized workshops employing highly qualified artisans (cf. remarks on style below).

Sculpting was clearly an activity of local character since there are no traces of similar representation in sites from Iraqi steppes contemporaneous with Nemrik (M’lefaat, Qermez Dare) or from the Syrian steppes (Mureibet). Recently there did emerge Anatolian analogies dating to the early Nemrik times (from Hallan Çemi), but these sculptures are stylized rather than realistic.

The distinction between complete and incomplete Nemrikian figurines and fragments thereof raises the problem of interpreting the causes of the incompleteness of some of the finds. On the one hand they are obviously specimens destroyed in the course of production or subsequent use. Such objects frequently occur as pebbles in stone pavements of the site. However, some of them may have been destroyed intentionally in order to “kill” an object placed in a grave (cf. remarks on house 6).

2. The figurines represent various things, and are either zoomorphic (predominantly) or anthropomorphic. The former include (Figs 1–4):

- a bird head/skull;
- an eagle head;
- a vulture head;
- a head of an unknown bird of prey (halfproduct);
- a female lion or panther head;

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\* Institute of Archaeology, Warsaw University, Al. Zwirki i Wigury 97/99, 02-089 Warsaw, Poland

**Table 1**    Description of figurines from Nemrik and their stratigraphic position.

Inv. no.	Description	State of preservation	Place of discovery/ association	Phase
2294/87	vulture head on shaft	complete	house 2A, floor	III
2397/87	entire snake	complete	house 5, fill	V
2387/87	male head (phallic) on shaft	incomplete, base broken off	house 6, grave 15	II
3208/89	eagle head on shaft	incomplete, base broken off	house 3, KM layer	V
2950/88	bovid hoof on shaft	complete	KM layer	IV
2517/87	fur (?) animal head on shaft	complete	Assyrian tell	III-V
1801/87	lion-panther head on shaft	complete, damaged right before completion	KM layer	IV
2278/87	body of woman (?) or animal (??)	charred, incomplete, head broken off	KM layer	IV
531/86	bird skull on shaft	incomplete, base broken off	refuse pit PT	V?
1087/86	bird head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	V
2550/87	head on shaft	halfproduct, top part damaged	KM layer	IV-V
3267/89	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	IV
3202/89	(bird?) head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	IV
2287/87	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	V
1530/86	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	IV?
1086/86	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	V
2687/87	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	K layer	II-III
528/86	head on shaft	halfproduct, base broken off	KM layer	IV-V
	pebble shaped like a head on shaft	pecially selected blank?	?	?
	shaft	base	?	?
	shaft	middle part	?	?
3121/88	shaft	base	house 9A, fill	II
529/86	shaft	middle part	KM layer	IV-V
3169/89	animal head on shaft; small ears, groove on crown of head	incomplete, base broken off, head turned into a chopping tool	KM layer	V
2239/87	head on shaft (lion?)	halfproduct, incomplete head remodeled by striking	house 4, fill	IV
2388/87	head on shaft (phallus?)	incomplete, charred head remodeled by striking, base missing	house 4, fill	IV

- a head of a small fur mammal;
  - an aurochs leg;
  - a snake representation.
- Among the anthropomorphic figurines we have:
- a male head with tattooed cheeks;
  - a figure of a woman (or perhaps an animal?).

This great variety of themes in the Nemrikian figurines (7/8–9 motifs), coupled with their considerable stylistic uniformity (see below) appear to be the distinctive features of the whole collection. One is tempted to believe that if the entire site were to be explored, this list of motifs would expand considerably.

The individualized themes suggest that we may have to do in Nemrik with individual deities connected to single houses (families) or even individual persons. If this were so, then we would have here a “pantheon” of domestic deities.

The hypothesis about the cult character of the figurines and their connection with specific houses or people will be documented further on basing on finds from houses 2A, 5 and 6.

3. Most of the Nemrikian figurines consist of a circular shaft topped by a sculpted head or skull. The opposite end of the shaft served as a grinder or, much less frequently, is shaped like a chopping tool.

The head may be positioned horizontally or tilted upwards. The bovid leg is similarly structured, with the hoof taking the place of the head. The snake also fits the convention, although in this case the shaft is more sculpted, with a convexity fashioned in its middle part.

The stylistic uniformity of the whole series is readily apparent in view of:

- (a) the thematic similarity,
- (b) similarities in figurine structure,
- (c) similarities in technical execution (the same sequence of preformation using the piquetage technique, initial smoothing, sculpting of details with a flint tool and polishing);
- (d) the realistic nature of depictions with all their fine details.

In all, we have here a high-class artistic phenomenon, without any doubt of local origin, which may therefore be viewed as a separate “Nemrikian school of sculpture” dating to 7800–6500 years bc. (Nemrik’s first phase is devoid of sculptures.)

The phenomenon has analogies in Anatolia (Hallaç Çemi), although the “school” there differs in having produced clearly stylized figurines. This is surprising if one considers that the “material culture” of Nemrik is clearly similar to that of the Zagros zone (all the way to Iran), and to a lesser extent of Syria, rather than of Turkey.

4. Three features, namely houses 2A, 5 and 6, provided some clues as to the function of the ceramic figurines.

*House 2A* (Figs 2 and 6). This circular structure, dated to settlement phase III, yielded a complete charred vulture figurine. It lay beak up on the northern incline of a bench which was one of the architectural elements of the house. Some 60 cm to the west of the figurine, on this same bench, there was found a severely charred human skeleton, oriented N-S, with arms outstretched towards the figurine. The skeleton was buried beneath two layers forming the fill of the house. There was red clay directly on the bones, and overlying it was strongly charred clay. A thin layer of plaster separated the two clay layers. This arrangement is no doubt the result of a violent destruction of the house by fire. One of these layers is from a collapsed wall and the other from a caved-in roof.

One gets the clear impression that the resident of house 2A attempted to rescue from the burning house the figurine, which must have been precious to him and which was permanently kept inside the building. He failed in his attempt and died in the blaze (charred bones), while the figurine remained on the floor and was also charred.

Two things are important here. Firstly, we have direct evidence of the organic connection of the figurines with houses; secondly, the tragedy which took place in house 2A indicates that the sculptures had an extraordinary significance for the Nemrikians.

Moreover, it appears that the complete figurines were most probably associated with houses, unlike the incomplete specimens known e.g. from graves. It is conceivable that the figurines were kept in specially dedicated places, most probably not on the floor however but rather set in or hung on walls.

*House 5* (Fig. 1). This subrectangular structure dating to the (youngest) settlement phase V yielded a complete snake figurine, found in the house's fill, 63 cm above the floor and right next to the eastern wall. This artifact could have ended up here in one of two ways: either it was carried into the house interior along with the cultural layer, contemporaneous with the building, that was filling in the house cavity, or else it was trapped in it by a collapsing wall in which it could have been somehow mounted.

If the latter were the case, one has to reckon with the possibility that the wall featured a recess/shelf to hold the figurine.

If so, this would probably be another object, after the one in house 2A, that was venerated by the residents of house 5 and kept in a place specially set aside for it. This would thus be a household member, part of the family. One cannot help thinking about analogies to the household deities known from many ancient cultures.

*House 6* (Fig. 2). This oval structure from settlement phase II contained two skeletal burials in the south-eastern part of the tomb, directly on the floor, right up against a wall (graves 15 and 30).

On this floor, between grave 15 and the wall, 15 cm from a skull, there was found an anthropomorphic figurine: a male head in the shape of a glans penis, the face featuring sculpted eyebrows, nose, lips and teeth, but lacking eyes; the cheeks were covered with tattoos. The sculpture is damaged, with the base part missing. Its functional connection with grave 15, or more generally with the tomb—since that is what “house” 6 most probably was—seems to be certain. The figurine is evidently a grave good, and it probably accompanied the buried person while that person was alive, being “killed” (broken) when its owner died.

5. The three cases described above allow the following conclusions:

- The figurines were objects of special importance in the life of the Nemrikian people, evidence of which is the devotion of the person who perished in the fire which consumed house 2A.
- The figurines were originally connected with houses in which they could have been kept in special “altars” in the house walls (houses 2A and perhaps 5).
- It is to be supposed that the figurines were being removed by inhabitants abandoning their houses. Not so in the case of houses that were violently destroyed (2A) from which the domestic deities could not be taken to safety; in this context, the presence of the figurine in house 5 is still to be accounted for.
- It appears that complete figurines are connected with houses (2A and 5?), whereas the intentionally destroyed incomplete specimens should be associated with burials (house 6). It seems that a deity “lived” and “died” with the house owner.
- Traces of work (as a grinder) and the conversion of a figurine into a chopping tool, indicate that the “living” sculptures were used as working tools, probably for ritualistic rather than practical purposes.
- It may be that there was a single deity/sculpture for every house/family, and that the pantheon was considerably diversified. The number of figurines in Nemrik is surprisingly close to the number of houses in the settlement, and this does not necessarily have to be a coincidence.
- Figurines were being placed in graves of particularly important individuals (“house” 6) after first being destroyed, *i.e.*, “killed.” This could suggest that when the lord of the house died, his individual deity was put to death while that of his son took over as the house deity.

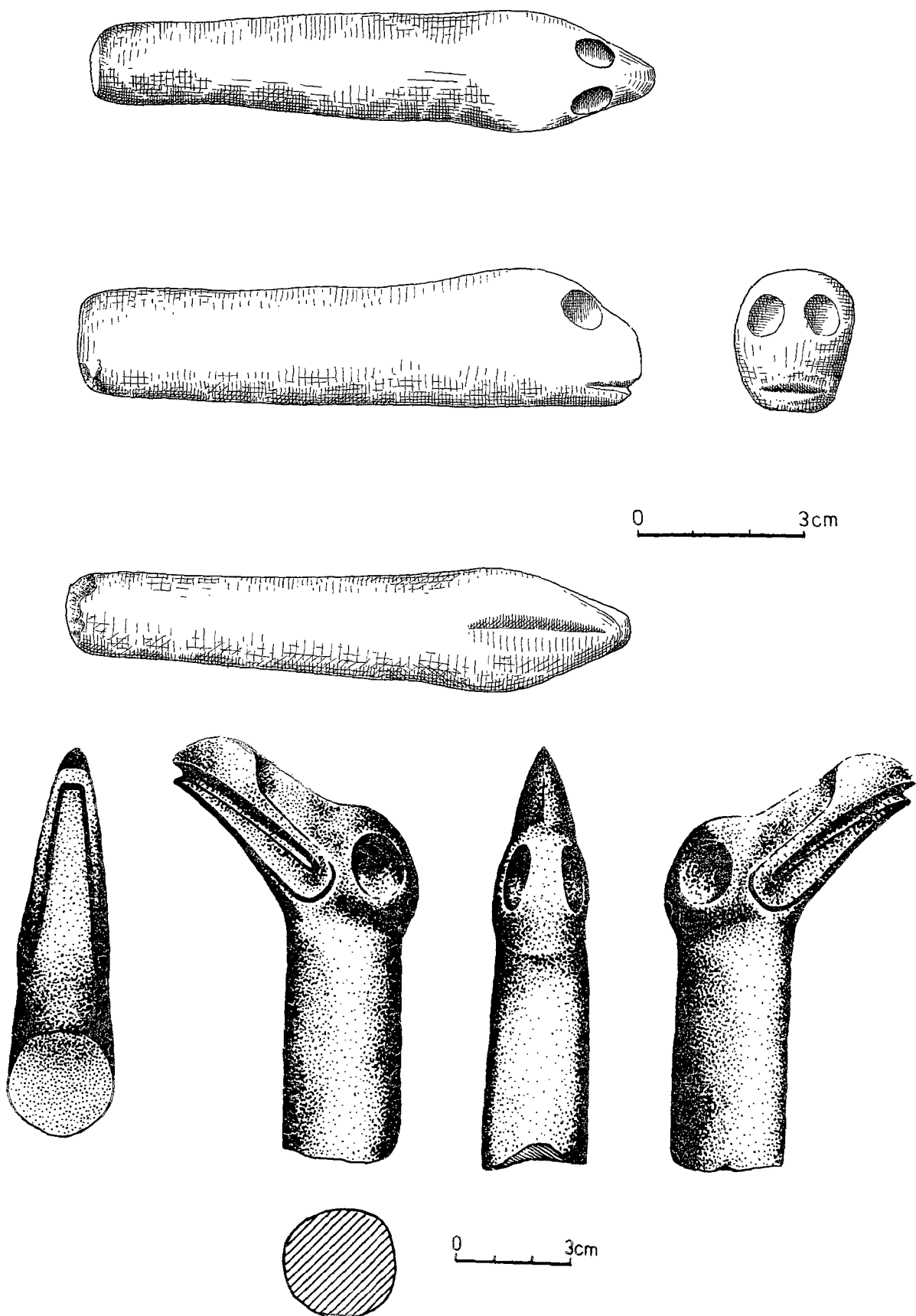
Generally, we have here what could have been a pantheon of individualized personal or house deities of a kind we never associated with the Early Neolithic.

6. The above conclusions, most of them fairly probable, provide new insights into the spiritual culture of settled Middle Eastern peoples of the Early Neolithic. At least as far as northern Iraq goes, we seem to be looking at domestic deities, possibly personal deities of heads of families. We can now better understand the rather numerous figurines functioning in the cultures of those times, although in all likelihood not all of them must have served the same function as that of those from Nemrik.

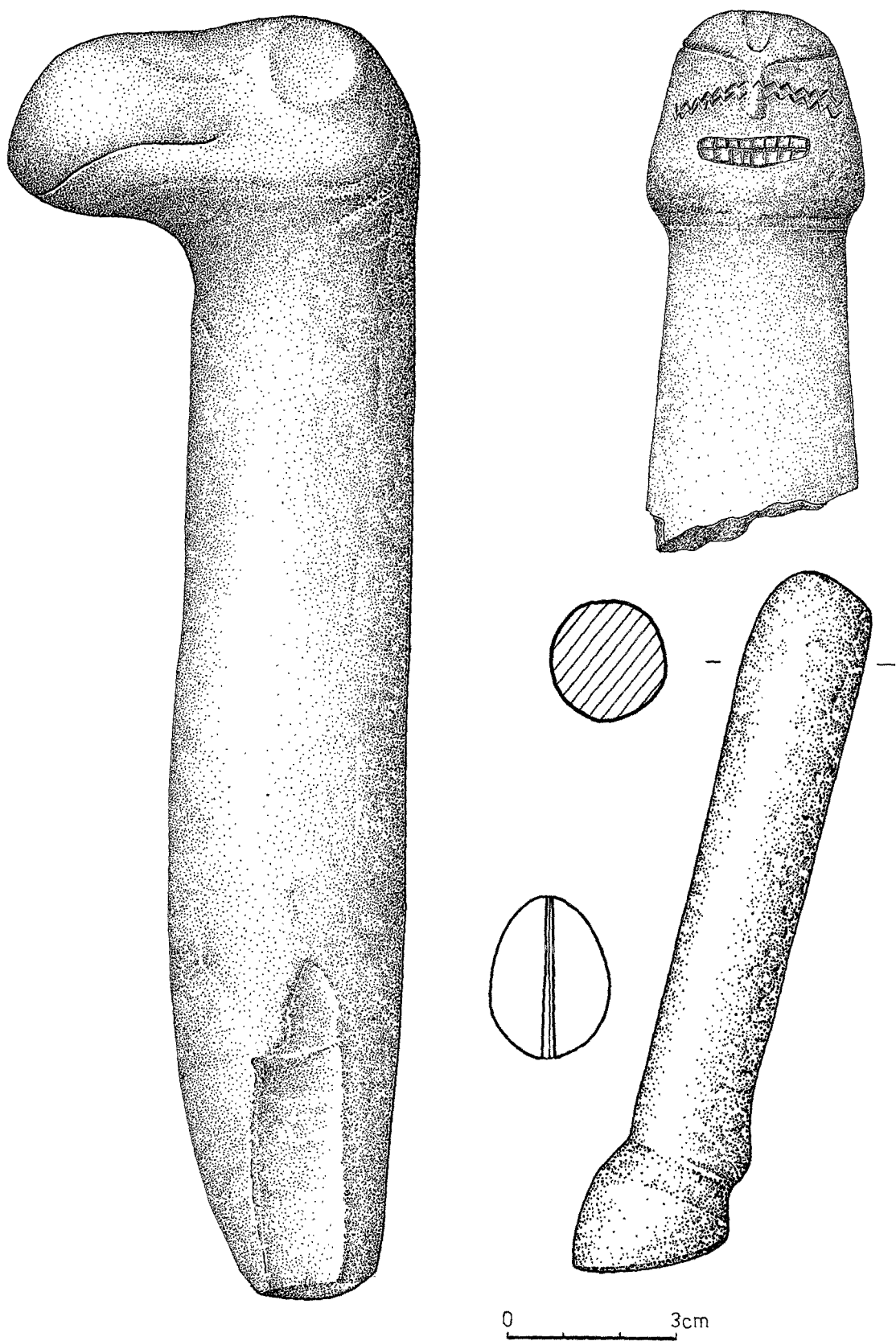
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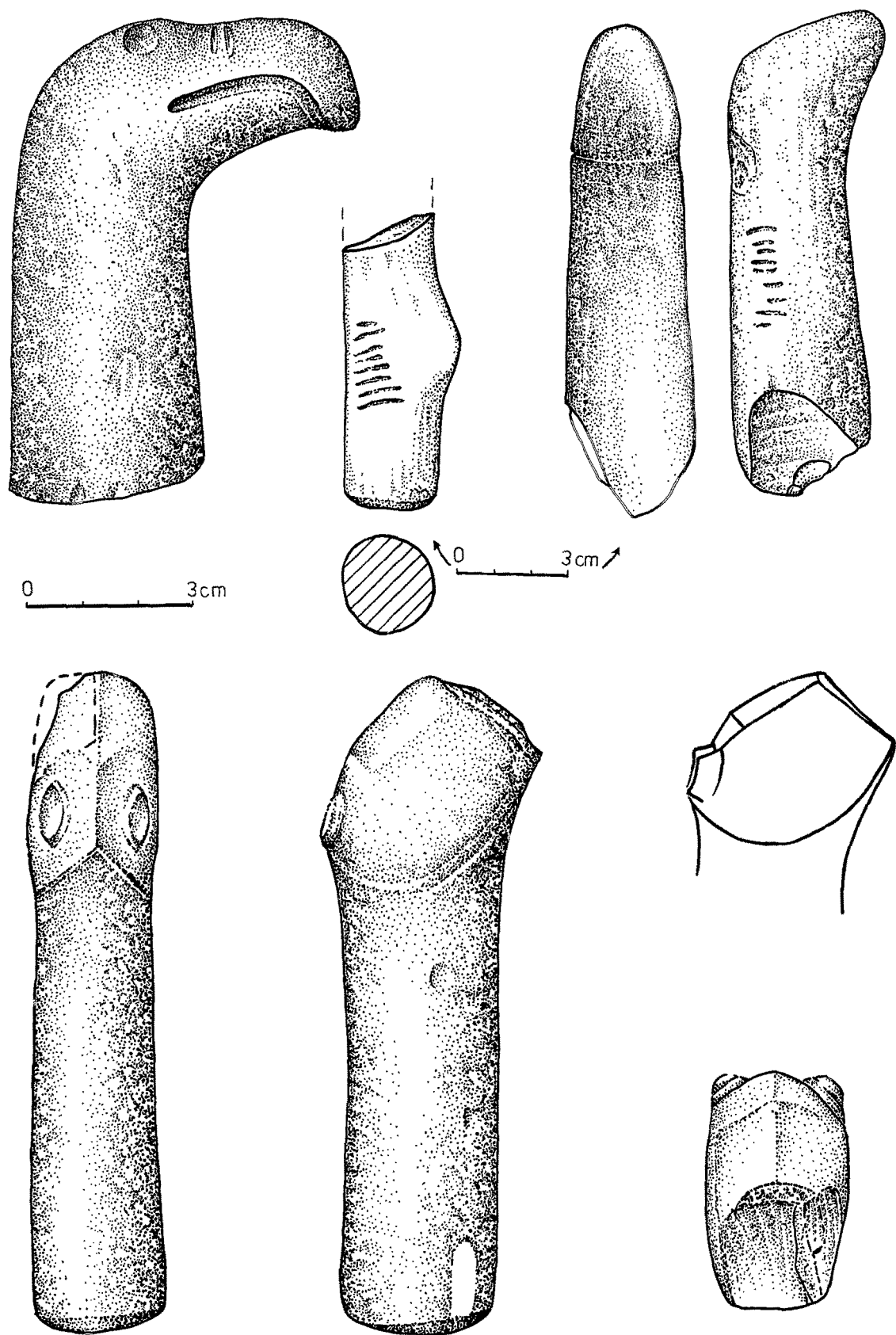
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**Fig. 1**    Nemrik. Stone sculptures: snake and bird skull.

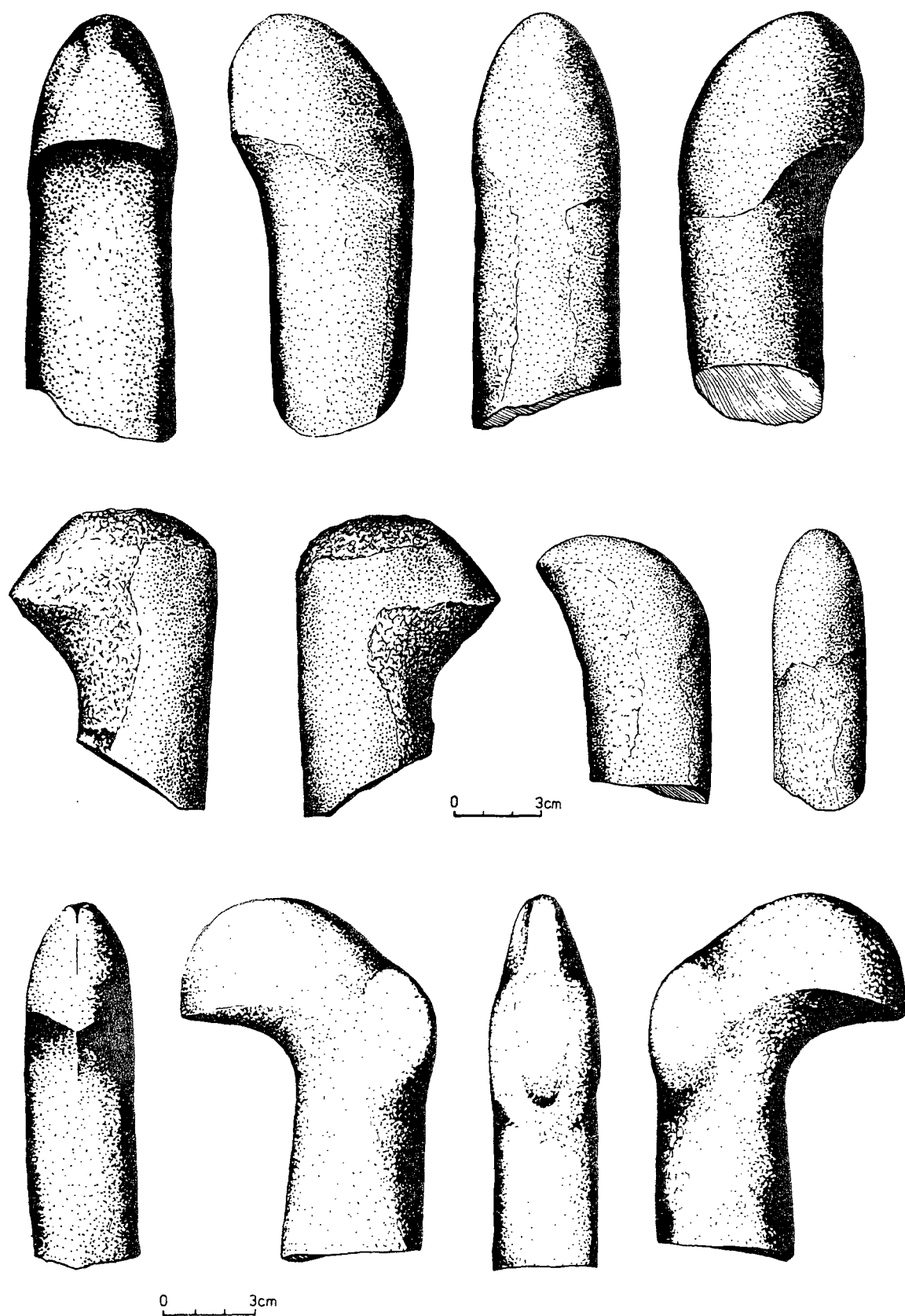


**Fig. 2** Nemrik. Stone sculptures: vulture, man and bovid hoof.

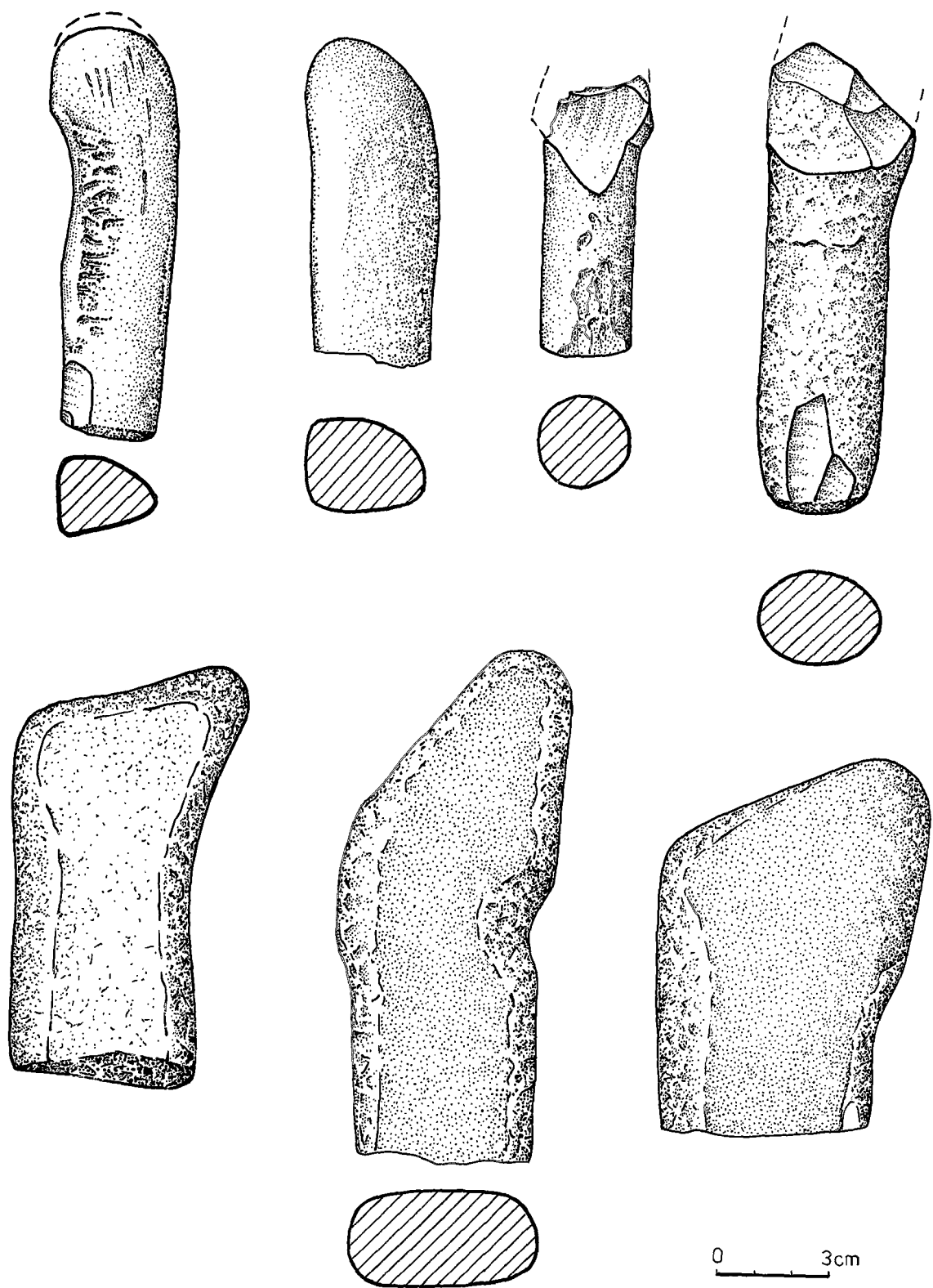


**Fig. 3**    Nemrik. Stone sculptures: eagle, woman (?), fur animal and lion/leopard.





**Fig. 4** Nemrik. Stone sculptures: half products, bird of prey.



**Fig. 5**    Nemrik. Stone sculptures: half products and destroyed/reworked sculptures.

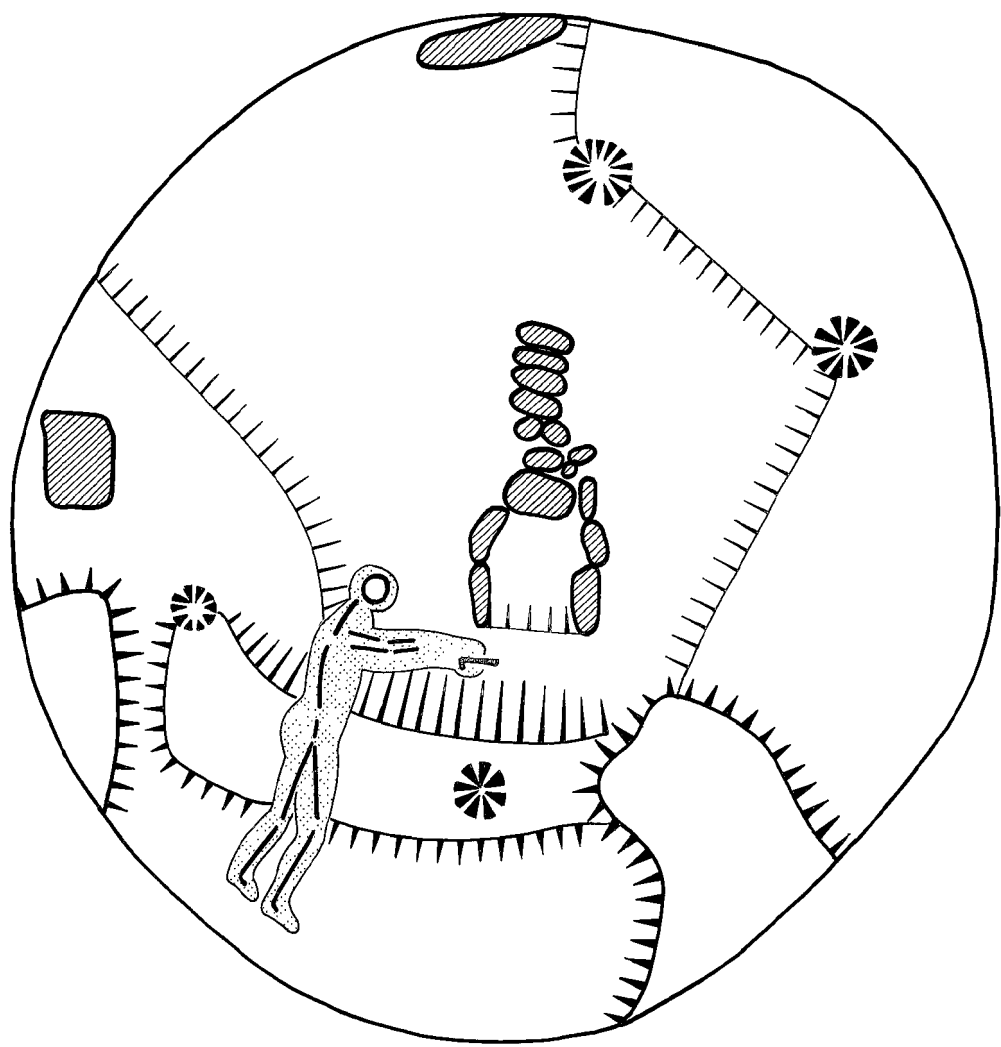


Fig. 6 Nemrik. Plan of House 2A.